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ABSTRACT

Reflecting upon and learning from one's working experiences in order to inform future practice is a mark of any professional. The dynamic structure of the early childhood classroom with its focus on the child within the broader context of the family and community makes the reflective process essential for all staff. This paper reports the outcomes of a pilot program in Australia designed to support early childhood staff as they focus on early literacy. In a case study of one service, the reflections of an early childhood teacher in Sydney are analyzed and discussed. The case study describes the shifts in the teacher's practices and understandings about the nature of early literacy as social practice, how it is encouraged, the role of parents, and the need to incorporate home understandings about literacy into all aspects of daily programming. Contains 28 references. (Author/KB)

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Reconceptualising literacy understanding and practices in early childhood settings

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Paper presented at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, 29 August — 1 September, 2000

ABSTRACT

Reflecting upon and learning from one s working experiences in order to inform future practice is a mark of any professional. The dynamic structure of the early childhood classroom with its focus on the child within the broader context of the family and community makes the reflective process essential for all staff. This paper reports the outcomes of a pilot program designed to support early childhood staff members as they focus on early literacy. In a case study of one service the reflective jottings of Kate, an early childhood teacher are analysed and discussed. The case study describes the shift in Kate s understandings and practices about the nature of early literacy as social practice, how it is encouraged, the role of parents and the need to incorporate home understandings about literacy into all aspects of daily programming.

RECONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

Ongoing learning within the working environment is a mark of the development of any professional desiring to keep abreast with contemporary issues and research, and for informing future practice. For some time however, ways of supporting staff and fostering effective changes in attitudes and approaches to teaching have confounded many researchers. It has been thought that one reason for staff resistance to professional development could be the ineffectiveness of traditional top-down models with their reliance on a good presenter to provide the answers (Abbott, Walton, Tapia and Greenwood, 1999; Lieberman, 1994). Implicit in these models is the notion that by merely presenting information about a topic, the motivation and skills for staff to use the ideas in their own setting will result.

Recently studies have suggested that the more traditional in-servicing models of professional development have been of some success. Central to these have been the notion of staff as adult learners and reflective practitioners, engaging in an examination of their professional lives, and of building supportive and collaborative networks (Daley,

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1999; Lieberman, 1994; Pascal, 1999; Ritchie, 1999; Woods, 1994). Effective professional development for teachers has been found to involve reflective thinking, training, consultation, feedback and collaboration, and partnerships with parents and consultants have been seen to be particularly effective in promoting and supporting change (Marieneau, 1999; Abbott et al., 1999; Pascal, 1999).

Essentially a range of phases support change, including: 1) an evaluation of current practices together with collaborative partners; 2) planning priorities for action based on evaluation; 3) implementation of new ideas and strategic plans, coupled with an openness to innovation and a willingness to consider new possibilities; and 4) reflection and review of the process (modified from Pascal, 1999). Reflecting on practice has been defined as bringing past events to a conscious level and of determining appropriate ways to think, feel and behave in the future (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994, p. 38).

Marienau (1999) believes that underlying reflective practice is the capacity for self-assessment which in turn is marked by four key attributes. The first is that intentional self-assessment is a powerful instrument for learning from experience (p. 143). The second attribute is that commitment to better practice is strengthened by self-assessment and that motivation to continue monitoring attitudes and behaviours to ensure better practice is maintained. Thirdly, the higher order thinking skills necessary for functioning in the workplace are enhanced by self-assessment. These skills involve setting and monitoring the progress of goals, seeking and offering feedback and enhancing problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking skills.

Finally, self-assessment fosters self-perception and authority which is demonstrated in a shift from an external to an internal locus of control. Moreover, a sense of competence is displayed through an increased confidence in communication abilities, working with other staff members, making decisions and pursuing realistic goals (Marienau, 1999).

With a view to reconceptualising understandings about literacy the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) and the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) jointly funded a study to map early literacy practices within early childhood services (See Makin et al., 1999). Following recommendations from this study, several early childhood staff members from a number of settings participated in a pilot professional development program as they sought to reconceptualise their understanding about how literacy is acquired and the way literacy is supported in

preschools and long daycare settings. This paper reports on the recorded changes in perceptions and practice of early literacy recorded by an early childhood professional in one setting as she reflected in the process.

RECONCEPTUALISING LITERACY

Increasingly interest has focused on the early years prior to the commencement of compulsory schooling in the development and strengthening of children s foundational understandings of literacy. It is in the earliest years that notions about what it means to be literate begin to develop as children participate in literacy events within a community of practice .

Although most children learn to read and write conventionally in the first years of school, Schickedanz (1999, p.1) notes that these achievements really represent the end result of years of literacy learning . Furthermore, the learning paths of children experiencing difficulty are hard to modify and are extremely resource intensive after this time (5-8 year olds) (Clay, 1993). Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught (1999) note that in print rich western societies, children begin to acquire literacy understandings very early in life. Far from being conceived of as purely text-based school-delivered knowledge as in previous thinking, literacy today is thought of as a range of specific practices acquired as part of a continuum, an emerging phenomenon, not tied to developmental stages.

Emergent literacy emphasises the continuous nature of development which emerges from birth onwards. Although the literacy practices and understanding of a pre-schooler may be immature and at times, unconventional, they reflect elements of the real-life literacy experiences occurring in the daily contexts of society. Literacy is social and collaborative in nature and is experienced as children and adults engage with text, environmental print, popular culture, computers and television. Just as children learn to talk by talking, reading and writing skills are acquired by approximating what real readers and writers do, such as scribbling, drawing and inventing text (Makin et al., 1999).

Far from being merely reading and writing therefore, developed as a response to early training, literacy in more recent times has been redefined as social practice . The principle underlying this social constructivist view of literacy is that it is not a unitary skill but is rather a set of practices used for social purposes (Cairney, 1995; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Gee, 1996; Luke 1992). What constitutes literacy and how literacy is used, is created, interpreted, recreated and negotiated by members of groups as a cultural tool

for communication (Bruner, 1986). Moreover, the meanings we attach to literacy reflect our culture, personality and experience, and essentially emerge from as well as contribute to our relationships with others (Cairney, 1995). As individuals share interactions and adapt their thinking, they make sense of their world (Au, 1993).

Schools, early childhood classrooms and families are each dynamic interactional, cultural environments with unique views about literacy. Families views of literacy are dependent on a range of factors including socioeconomic levels, ethnicity, educational history, family stability, gender and health. The literacy values and practices of families have the potential to shape the course of children s literacy in terms of opportunities, recognition, interaction and models available to them (Hannon, 1995, p.104). Although there is great diversity of literacy practice amongst families, failure to acknowledge and celebrate anything other than literacies acceptable to the mainstream , may in fact, albeit unwittingly, contribute to academic failure (Makin et al., 1999).

In early childhood classes, literacy is embedded in many activities although frequently it is centered on story reading and discussion using the preferred discourses of the dominant groups within society. As participants within an academic society, staff members frequently develop school-based literacy discourses which are reflective of the socially and culturally determined ideologies of its dominant members. According to Gee (1996) many of society s hierarchical structures and social inequalities are maintained through the use of what he terms dominant discourses . Albeit unconsciously, teachers act as gate keepers of social practice by determining what is read, ways of being literate and speech as they monitor children s activity and interact with parents (Gee, 1996). The validation of only preferred or dominant literacy discourses creates structures of power and inequity, thereby further disenfranchising those who are not the holders of such cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

Recent research has highlighted the importance of parent involvement in children s education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein, 1996), and that the most academically successful students have been found to be those whose family literacy practices are most congruent with school literacy practices (Cairney, 1995; Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995; Cairney & Ruge, 1998). Such research emphasises the importance of the degree of match between the literacy practices of families and services, especially in the critical period for literacy development between 0 — 8 years (Clay, 1993).

It has been found that when schools and families work together there is a mutuality of concern and literacy links are easier to forge. Much of the literacy practiced in schools and centers however, is neither based on, nor related to the literacy activities experienced within families or the community (Bloome, 1987; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper have been drawn from the second phase of the study funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Community Services (DoCS) and detailed in The Early Literacy and Social Justice Project Report (Mc Naught, Clugston, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, Ashton, Hayden & Makin, 2000). Following an earlier study, Mapping Literacy Practices in Early Childhood Services (Makin et al., 1999), staff from seventeen early childhood settings took part in a pilot program designed to support the development of an early literacy strategy for professional development across NSW.

This paper reports on one staff member, Kate, in a single setting, Smoky Hills Preschool[1], in the Western region of Sydney. Kate is an early childhood professional with a four year degree and many years of experience in prior to school and early years of school settings.

Pilot Program

The pilot program was based on three assumptions: 1) that knowledge is jointly constructed by participants as they interact with each other, 2) that literacy is social practice, and 3) that there are Core Principles for facilitating literacy learning in under 5 s. These principles are:

- Principle 1: Exchanging literacy information
- Principle 2: Building on literacy information
- Principle 3: Planning for individual literacies
- Principle 4: Integrating literacy experiences throughout the day
- Principle 5: Scaffolding literacy understandings (McNaught et al., 2000).

As recommended in the mapping report (Makin et al., 1999) an initial workshop for staff from a number of settings within the Western region was held. At this meeting the results from the mapping project were disseminated and plans for the pilot, shared.

To support staff during the pilot (over a period of 10 weeks), a university consultant was designated to visit each setting on a regular basis. The number, length, time and formality of visits, as well as the number of participants involved varied across settings. At Smoky Hills the consultant visited for between half an hour and two hours approximately each fortnight, but face-to-face communication was also supported by telephone, newsletter and email.

Based on the assumption that knowledge is jointly constructed, the role of the university consultant was to liaise with staff, allowing questions to be answered, issues to be clarified, and suggestions to be tested prior to implementation. In some settings this contact was necessary to focus and motivate staff. At other settings, staff engaged the university consultants as mentors with whom insights and ideas could be shared. At Smoky Hills, Kate shared ideas with the consultant who reinforced and affirmed these and offered advice where necessary or clarified issues relating to literacy as social practice or the core principles. The five Core Principles stress the importance of communicating with families, sharing family and community literacies, planning for individual literacies, incorporating literacy throughout the day and scaffolding literacy understandings, and to this end, Kate organised a workshop at which a university consultant shared ideas about literacy and the family/community role in promoting it.

In addition to implementing literacy ideas based on the five core principles, preparing action plans and documenting the process, Kate was invited to engage in a reflective process examining her responses to a) the collaborative process with staff and families; b) the notion of literacy as social practice, and c) reconceptualising literacy.

REFLECTIONS

Reflective self-assessment is in fact researching oneself and such a process requires motivation, honesty, a degree of objectivity, collaboration with respected colleagues and a commitment to being prepared to act on these reflections, experiences and discussion to promote change.

The outcomes from Kate s reflectivity had profound effects on her professional understandings, her ongoing commitment to effective education, the way she critically evaluates literacy and literacy experiences and the way she perceives herself as an early childhood professional. This is consistent with Marieneau s (1999) findings and

[1] The names of the setting and staff have been changed to guarantee privacy and anonymity.

supports the degree to which collaborative support from colleagues and the self-reflective process contributes to professional proficiency.

Self-reflection as an instrument for learning from experience

Marieneau (1999) notes that as experiential learning takes place, reflectivity and introspection are stimulated and there appears to be a heightened awareness of learning. This in turn fosters shifts in perspectives and a desire to have new ideas and changed thinking affirmed.

Literacy as social practice is a relatively new concept for many teachers accustomed to perceiving literacy as a skill or set of skills largely acquired at school. Moreover, the role of the family and community in children s early literacy acquisition, for many teachers has been underplayed. As Kate set about engaging with the basic tenets of the professional development pilot, she was challenged to construct new ways of thinking, to reflect on the possibilities these ideas held and to implement them into her daily practice.

For instance when confronted by the need to communicate more effectively with parents about children s literacy (Principle 1), Kate was forced to admit her discomfort. In her journal she noted,

> I am not naturally comfortable with this. I d much rather write a note than try to make conversation with people I don t know well. This is something I must develop I suppose. Children are showing an interest in reading tasks but it could be made more consistent by making it a focus and letting parents know that their children will be bringing home reading material that they have made. I ll think about it for next week.

Athough some parents had been involved in the pilot from its inception, many were unaware of the new focus for literacy being implemented in their setting. Kate noted in her journal that she made more effort to invite parents/families by:

- Changing the program and spending more time outdoors talking to parents
- Inviting parents (face to face) to write their names on a roster sheet and stay for a session
- Writing on children s drawings and art work and suggesting that the children read the sentence to Mum and Dad
- Letting parents know as child goes home that he/she has written a story and can read it.

With surprise Kate recorded some time later her progression with parents and her feelings regarding communication with them. In her journal she noted,

> I m amazed at how easy it is once one makes the effort. Today I told parents It s Welcome Wednesday . As we won t be having group time first thing parents are

> welcome to come in an play for awhile. Most came in, about 6 stayed for a full half hour and played and interacted with their kids. I was very pleased but I need to think through having group time. First thing is great for the kids but it doesn t really encourage parents to be involved.

Kate s reflections led her to consider literacies other than just reading and writing and she encouraged the sharing of literacy examples from home and the community. For example, she noted in her journal,

> Anne brought in a word game and a parent helper sat with her the whole morning and supported children as they matched letters to make words. Anne really enjoyed this and so did her friends. She felt very important. The following day, Susannah brought in a pack of cards and we played snap . She showed me a card trick her Dad showed her.

Commitment to better practice and the motivation for renewed refection

As the pilot progressed, Kate embraced the new ideas shared with the university consultant and devised through discussion with her staff. Once implemented, ongoing reflectivity and monitoring of her own performance became a part of Kate s professional practice. For example, when she decided to incorporate books and reading into play time she noted in her journal,

> They (the children) loved it and picked favourite books off the shelf. I took opportunities to point out words as I read with them and after each page asked children to find words. Goodnight Owl has good print for this. Children found repetitive words like owl and sleep . Does this take away from the experience of enjoying literature? Children responded to the task enthusiastically, but it s important to consider the enjoyment of literature through the flow of words and appreciation of illustrations. I guess there s a time and a place for what I was doing. A balance perhaps? If we don t teach specific skills and concepts, how do children learn? Not all can learn through osmosis. Most would need the sort of structure and scaffolding I was providing at some time — why not now if they are ready?

Another characteristic of Kate s reflective practice was targeting areas for improvement and development. Recognising the computer as a valuable literacy tool, much desired by the children, Kate noted in her journal,

> I have been looking at OK, can you write me a story with the word processor or can you draw me a picture looking at some of the computer programs that do some specific teaching of literacy skills like recognition of words or letters and sitting with the kids and talking to them about it (the computer) and working with them.

Higher level thinking skills - functioning more effectively

Self-assessment and collaboration with colleagues and university consultants sharpened Kate s interpersonal skills and promoted goal-directness and critical thinking

in problem-solving and decision-making. Having promoted a range of literacies amongst families, encouraged them to share their literacy practices and ideas with staff and the other children and incorporated literacy practices into a range of experiences across the day, parents were also encouraged to expand on literacy at home. While this was an exciting development for Kate, it was not without problems. For example, one enthusiastic Mum brought in an exercise book she had bought for her children to practice writing at home. Of concern to Kate was the manner this parent presented literacy opportunities to her children. In her journal, Kate expressed her own thoughts about how to deal with this matter writing,

> Susannah is given drills and exercises for writing the letters in her name. Her Mum is very proud of her progress but is concerned at how slow she is and about her lack of drawing ability. I am torn between encouraging the parent to continue working with her child and educating her about keeping tasks interesting and age appropriate. The sort of work that Susannah brings from pre-school is probably not valued by this parent because her expectations are of structure and formality. This has reminded me of the need to communicate with parents about helpful and developmentally appropriate writing/reading tasks. At the same time I need to listen to parents expectations and desires as to how their children are educated. A balance needs to be struck, hopefully our parent workshop will offer some insights for both groups.

One goal that Kate was keen to promote was a seamless transition from the early childhood setting to school. Being a DET preschool, many of the children in her class would attend the school within whose premises the setting operated and meetings between school and preschool staff were common. Reflection, collaboration and self-assessment had given Kate a new awareness of the importance of establishing effective literacy links, however her ideas were not always received well. Kate recorded in her journal,

> I have just come back from a kindergarten meeting. It was very discouraging and I feel quite disillusioned. They are just not interested and I m disappointed in my lack of ability to influence the teachers and communicate to them how valuable it would be to create more meaningful school/preschool links.

Thinking critically about the focus on literacy in the setting was evident when Kate wrote,

> Children responding very well (to the literacy ideas planned for all areas of programming throughout the day), but I am concerned that only some of the children are being given these opportunities (i.e. ones that have a natural interest). I need to discuss this with Helen (assistant) as well and get her to spend more time with children.

Self-perception and authority

Even when her thinking seemed to be at odds with some of her colleagues in the primary school, Kate believed in herself and her ideas. This reinforces some of Marieneau s (1999) findings about participants self-perceptions following self-reflection. Rather than look for a universal right and external validation , collaborative learning and self-reflection enhances participant s sense of self and bases assessment on personal values, understandings and experience. While frustrated at her lack of success at promoting more effective literacy transitions to school, Kate does not waver in the efficacy of her own understandings about early literacy. Again, in her journal she notes,

> I m disappointed in my lack of ability to influence the teachers and communicate to them how valuable it would be to create more meaningful school/preschool links.

DISCUSSION

Reconceptualising ways of thinking and acting involves a number of processes, including reflecting on current practice, collaboration with others, re-assessment of goals, learning from research and personal motivation. For Kate, the reconceptualising literacy as social practice process initially involved time and considerable self-examination.

To start with, Kate felt obliged to reconsider her thoughts and practices because this was expected of her as a participant in the pilot. Echoing her perception of literacy as skills based, something taught to children as they mature, a comment in the early weeks of the pilot summed up Kate s thinking. Overwhelmed with trying to reconceptualise new ideas, coupled with the busyness of the preschool day, she said with emphasis to one of the university consultants,

> Next year I m not doing literacy!

As Ritchie (1999) notes however, when participants are encouraged to engage in collective dialogue, critical thinking and evaluation occurs and thus it was for Kate over the succeeding weeks. What were once perceived as isolated skills, discussed in designated language times while reading or story telling, became the pivotal point around which many experiences were designed. A comment in her reflective journal about a student undertaking practicum in Kate s setting, underscores the shift in perceptions regarding literacy which developed over several weeks. Kate noted,

> It was interesting to see his (the student s) response to my suggestion that he incorporate literacy into some of his plans. He listened politely and nodded his head as I gave some examples. Next morning he said he d concentrate on literacy next week as that might give him inspiration for activities. I think he

thought he had to do literacy lessons rather than make literacy a part of everything we do. I re-explained (about literacy as social practice across academic domains throughout the day), but I don t know if he understood, I ll see next week.

A number of important outcomes emerged for Kate following her engagement in the pilot professional development study. Firstly there was a change in knowledge. Over the course of the pilot what constitutes literacy and how it is conceived and used by families has been redefined. Secondly, there have been changes to practice. Collaboration with staff, colleagues from the broader early childhood field and university consultants have led to a sharing of ideas and understanding about the importance of incorporating literacy across all experiences, throughout the day. Thirdly, there have been changes to Kate s perception of herself as a professional teacher and her role in supporting children and families with the community. Learning from experience through intentional reflection and self-assessment has resulted in greater perceptual awareness of what is happening in her setting and how situations might be addressed and experiences enhanced. Finally, new understandings about the continuous nature of learning have led Kate into further academic studies where she is focusing specifically on early literacy.

While most studies on reflective learning have focused, not surprisingly, on the individual learner (Brookfield, 1984), what is different about the early literacy study is that it was based on the assumption that learning and self-reflection occur within a collaborative environment. The social nature of the learning environment within which reflectivity and self-assessment takes place have largely been ignored. In concentrating attention on the features of the individual alone, the collaborative networks and informal learning exchanges which are so characteristic of reflective teaching experiences are forgotten. Brookfield (1987) recognises that without an exchange of ideas and critical thinking to identify values assumptions and beliefs, the whole process may be a wasted exercise.

The professional development pilot study has served a twofold purpose. Firstly, it has provided the participants with an opportunity to extend their thinking about literacy and to build on and enhance their current practices. It has helped them implement strategies for building shared understandings about children s diverse literacies between homes and settings and provided new understandings about creating partnerships with families for more equitable educational outcomes.

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Secondly, the study has highlighted the effectiveness of a professional development model which involves a mixture of training, consultation, feeback, collaboration and reflective self-assessment. As Marieneau (1999) notes, this self-assessment process has the capacity to open the door to transformative and continuous learning and personal development.

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